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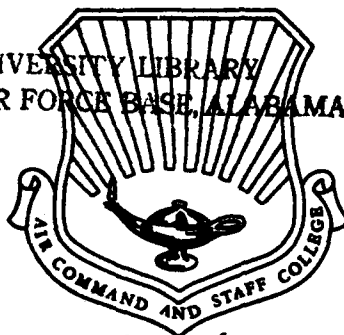
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STUDENT RESEARCH REPORT

FELLOWSHIP: PREPARATION FOR
EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

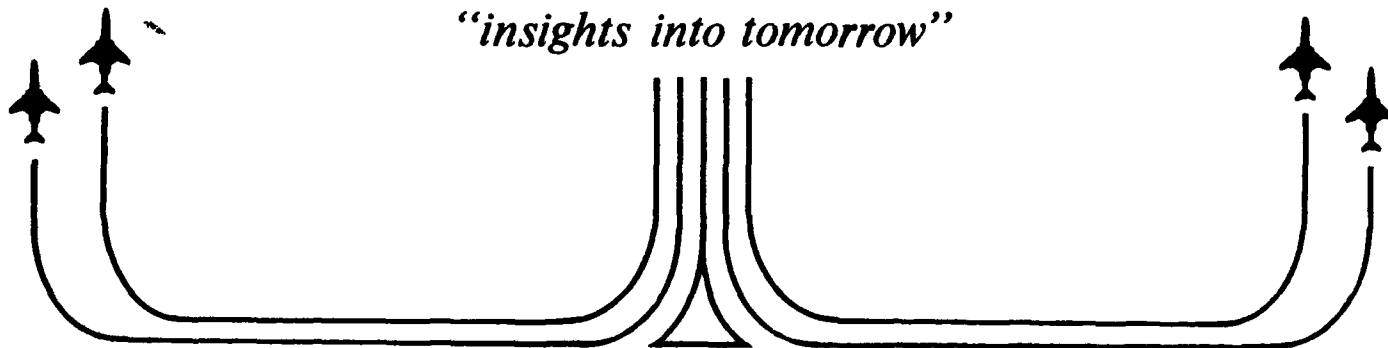
Maj G. B. Toumbacaris, Jr.

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"insights into tomorrow"



Toumbacaris, G. B., Jr.

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FOLLOWERSHIP: PREPARATION FOR EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

By

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ABSTRACT

The conventional approach to improving leadership focuses on the leader himself, his attributes, traits, or situations in which he is involved. This article presents the idea that effective leadership can be the result of better, more active followership. That is, followers have the most consistent effect on leadership, and by improving follower activities and skills, they can improve the overall level of leadership. The discussion emphasizes those areas that concern followers on a daily basis. The article concludes with the idea that followers can achieve the best results by concentrating on skills of followership in their work environment.

PREFACE

This article addresses the role of followership in today's Air Force, with the goal of improving the overall quality of leadership. The author undertook this project because the primary thrust of current literature and teaching focuses exclusively on leadership and management in the context of commanders and supervisors. Followers also confront many organizational and interpersonal problems on a daily basis. The author believes that followers, as individuals, can do much to improve and correct problem situations within their organizations. As individuals practice and enhance their "followership skills," their influence can extend upward to their leaders, laterally to their peers, and downward to subordinates. To the degree that they can influence others, followers can improve the quality of life in the Air Force.

This research project was prepared as an article for publication in satisfaction of my Air Command and Staff College research requirement. It may not be copyrighted.

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

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Education:

1971	MCS, Texas A&M University
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The Need for More Effective Followership

As a student at Air Command and Staff College, I heard many guest speakers express the need for more effective leadership in the Air Force. General David C. Jones, as Air Force Chief of Staff, expressed a similar view when he stated his desire "to make a good service better."¹ I believe that the Air Force develops good leaders, but my experience and the comments of fellow officers suggest that the Air Force can improve the quality of its leaders. And many officers and airmen expressed much the same perceptions in the Air Force Quality of Life surveys. When asked to describe the quality of leadership in the Air Force, only 41 percent of the officers and 22 percent of the airmen included in the survey perceived it as excellent or above average.²

While I was considering possibilities for improving leadership, the thought occurred to me that followers determine who becomes effective or ineffective leaders. In other words, people can gain new insights into their responsibilities and exercise more positive influence on their organizations if they view their jobs from the perspective of followers. And, when they view their

responsibilities from this perspective, they are less likely to fall victim to the syndrome of "It's a leadership problem." I consider the follower perspective very important because, in many organizations, it is quite difficult to determine exactly who is the leader. Some people view a leader as anyone in a supervisory position; others view only the highest ranking officers as leaders; and still others include all people between these extremes.

My Concept of Followership

In my opinion, a follower is anyone who is supervised by, or is responsible to, someone at a higher level. This definition obviously suggests that all Air Force personnel are followers. Even though they may occupy supervisory or command positions, they are followers in the sense that they report to higher authority.

I do not imply that my concept for developing followership is an original idea; but I hypothesized that I could examine a variety of sources and establish some fundamental principles of effective followership. After a considerable period, I concluded what I believed was a reasonably exhaustive search and discovered that I

had limited information on followership. Nevertheless, I decided that I would test my concept to determine whether it might be beneficial to the Air Force or, at least, to my own professional career.

In my initial effort to develop principles of followership and use the principles as points of departure for further discussion, I found that most principles are highly subjective. I sought to avoid the kind of trap encountered by many early writers on leadership when they identified traits or characteristics of successful leaders and then attempted to establish leadership models based on the traits. Most people agree that effective leaders do not possess precisely the same traits or characteristics and that they do not apply identical leadership or managerial styles. I therefore concluded that effective followers also show wide variations in traits and styles.

I based my study of followership on the assumption that the average individual has little effect on leadership as a whole, but he can improve his skills of followership. For example, concerned followers certainly exercised a positive influence in changing the Officer Effectiveness Report. On the other hand, if a follower does not strive for improvement, the result can be less

effective leadership. In what areas can an individual improve his skills in followership? To answer this question, I examined the USAF Management Consultation Information System (MCIS) maintained by the Leadership and Management Development Center at Air University. The MCIS has a data base of information derived from reports of visits by LMDC management consultant teams concerned with increasing mission effectiveness by enhancing job satisfaction and improving the quality of Air Force life. (All data in the MCIS contains no information that can be traced to specific Air Force units.)³

One MCIS report identified a number of significant management problems encountered by these teams during their visits to Air Force installations. Since the teams identified the problems as fundamental concerns of management, I decided to select problem areas that seem most relevant from the perspective of the follower: communications, delegation, recognition, leadership styles, and work hours/schedules.⁴

Areas for Applied Followership

Followers have continuing opportunities to play major roles in improving communications:

Organizational communications problems are the most widespread concerns found in the

MCIS. The data include perceived deficiencies in both oral and written communication--upward, downward and lateral. The consultants have frequently observed that poor communications contributes to the use of widespread rumors. People react to what they believe to be factual information. Morale is often adversely affected by poor communications and much energy is often misdirected as a result of inadequate or misunderstood information.⁵

Unfortunately, MCIS data reflects that Air Force personnel at all levels perceive ineffective upward, downward, and lateral communications. Upward communication to higher management, in particular, is often completely lacking or is so selectively filtered that it contains little or no information of value. For example, 52 percent of the base commanders surveyed by the Air Force Management Improvement Group (AFMIG) in 1975 stated that the most effective means of receiving feedback from military personnel assigned to their bases were personal contacts with military members other than their staffs.⁶ Only 13 percent of the respondents believed that their staffs were the most effective means. Additionally, only 60 percent of these same commanders felt that they received enough feedback.⁷ The reports of LMDC contain such remarks as the following:

In many cases, supervisors and managers have blocked upward communication channels. As a result, we often hear such comments as: "I

don't want to bother the boss with this," or "I just didn't think the information was important."⁸

One naturally feels that downward communication would be one of the most effective communication areas because most Air Force communications follow a downward course. In most instances, however, supervisors either fail to pass on necessary information or they disseminate unclear or confusing information. The MCIS reflects the perception that "supervisors have blocked downward communication by declaring information they have as of little interest to their subordinates. In such cases subordinates have felt deprived, left out, and considered as 'unimportant members of the organization.'"⁹ Lack of downward communication even extends to job performance. Only one of four individuals stated that they frequently receive feedback from their supervisors.¹⁰ Lateral communication fares better probably because people feel more comfortable when they discuss information with their peers.

I firmly believe that followers can do much to improve the Air Force communications environment by recognizing that effective communications follow a clear two-way street. Not only must the boss clearly understand the task to be accomplished, but followers must also have compatible perceptions of the task as the boss sees

it. Thus, followers can apply certain simple techniques of their own to insure successful communications. If they do not understand their instructions, they should recognize their problem and ask for clarification. They can also restate the instructions and request acknowledgment. In either event, they can play important roles in maintaining clear communications up and down the chain of command. For example, the boss may use an unfamiliar term or acronym in presenting a briefing or giving instructions to a group. The group clearly does not understand the terminology, but no one asks for clarification. Is such an impasse necessary? How much time and energy is misspent because of simple lack of communication?

As a follower, I have often felt that I could do nothing about improving a manager's delegation of responsibility. But every follower can at least be prepared and willing to accept responsibility. Many Air Force members have outstanding educational backgrounds and superb technical skills or knowledge, but they appear reluctant to accept additional responsibility. This apparent reluctance may stem from their doubts about their ability to handle additional responsibility or from a supervisor's misconception of individuals. On the other hand, some individuals are willing to accept responsibility, but they are not prepared to carry it

out. LMDC experience confirms that Air Force personnel attach major importance to proper delegation of responsibility and authority:

This issue contains much emotion and has a high potential for degradation of mission effectiveness. Subordinates frequently perceive that they "do not have the authority and responsibility commensurate with their rank, position, and expertise." Many feel that they are denied a "piece of the action" or are not permitted to participate in decisions directly related to their expertise and responsibilities. Too many workers feel they are under-utilized, that they have expertise, capabilities, and desire for increased responsibility...Delegation communicates trust and is a form of recognition. Conversely, the lack of delegation implies a lack of trust....¹¹

An effective follower has an obvious obligation to communicate his ability and his willingness to accept increased responsibility. Volunteering to take on a difficult project with a short suspense may be just the action necessary to catch the boss's attention and open the door to new opportunities.

Air Force personnel often feel that they do not always receive earned recognition. In the 1975 AFMIG survey, slightly less than one-half of the officers surveyed felt that they frequently received recognition. The remaining 52 percent answered that they were recognized only sometimes (33 percent), seldom, or never (19 percent).¹² These perceptions have been further

reinforced by LMDC consultation teams in their visits to various bases. Their reports indicate that people perceive a lack of recognition ranging from the simple informal "thank you" to such formal recognition programs as "Airman of the Quarter." The awards and decorations program is often perceived as inequitable and arbitrary. LMDC teams add that many managers and supervisors maintain close contact with their people only when things go wrong. They tend to ignore their subordinates when the jobs are performed effectively. The MCIS report contains this statement:

As a result of these practices, people feel that their contributions are not recognized or appreciated, that, no one cares, and a general feeling that they are "unimportant." A feeling of apathy resulting in poor motivation therefore often detracts from effective mission accomplishment.¹³

The Air Force has dealt, in part, with this problem by publishing the "Recognition Guide for Air Force Supervisors," which effectively addresses the supervisor's side of the issue, but what can a follower do to improve his opportunities for recognition?

Although the follower may be somewhat handicapped with the idea that he does not want to "blow his own horn," I feel that he is not completely helpless. In the first place, he can always do his part by keeping his boss properly informed. This form of communication

not only lets the boss know what the follower is doing but also affords the follower an opportunity to let the boss know how things are going. Of course, the follower should coordinate with his boss on the frequency and depth of the communication. The follower should also recognize that the degree of communication will vary from task to task depending on such factors as the supervisor's knowledge of the task, the individual's knowledge, criticality of the task, higher level of interest, and so on. My own experience shows that proper recognition is more likely when both parties communicate effectively on a timely basis. Forty percent of the base commanders surveyed in 1975 stated that they did not receive enough feedback from personnel on their bases.¹⁴ I believe that the same problem applies to supervisors in general. I also believe that a boss cannot properly recognize his followers if he does not know what they are doing, how they are doing, and the types of problems that they encounter. In the second place, a follower should not hesitate to tell the boss that a co-worker is doing a good job when an appropriate occasion arises. This can build good teamwork, and the boss will not think less of the individual for the information.

Problems with leadership styles and practices rank second in the frequency of cases observed by LMDC consultation teams:

The following statements are typical of cases where leadership styles and practices have been of concern: "overly authoritarian," "dictatorial," "out of touch with people,"... "poor planning," "failure to delegate," "failure to communicate," "does not praise." ...Where we have found leaders practicing sound communication techniques, delegating appropriately and praising liberally, we have not encountered this issue.¹⁵

These LMDC observations and my own observations lead me to conclude that followers can affect communications, delegation, and recognition of their efforts. When they assume an active role in communication and express their willingness and ability to assume additional responsibility, they have a direct effect on their boss's leadership style.

Another way to affect his style is to contract for a leadership style. That is, the follower and his boss discuss various job-related factors, such as past experience, job knowledge, an understanding of requirements, willingness to accept responsibility, motivation, and personal commitment. Depending on his knowledge of specific tasks, the follower may contract for light, moderate, or close supervision. If the follower repeats

a task that he has performed well in the past, light supervision would be sufficient. If he undertakes a new task, closer supervision might be more appropriate. Similarly, he discusses other factors that may influence the contract. This procedure can cover all aspects of an individual's job. The resulting contract may contain a variety of supervisory levels, each relating to a particular task. The most important aspect of the contract is that both the boss and the follower jointly agree to the terms set forth in the contract and that both understand their mutual obligations. Although all followers may not have jobs that allow for this contracting approach, any follower can discuss with his boss the basic idea of varying the degree of supervision with the task.¹⁶

Many followers feel that they have little or no control over their work hours and schedules, but I contend that effective followers can definitely influence this area of the work environment. Common perceptions involve excessive overtime requirements, weekend/holiday work, and inequities in duty schedules. Although followers and even their bosses cannot always avoid overtime situations, concerned followers can certainly discuss inequities in overtime assignments with their

supervisors. Consultation teams report some cases in which people must "hang around" for entire shifts with little or nothing to do.¹⁷ Followers can tactfully communicate such conditions to their supervisors, who may simply be unaware of the situation.

However, followers have the best opportunities to influence their work schedules when they combine effective communications and demonstrated willingness to accept responsibility. In other words, they can ask to schedule their own work; and, when a supervisor is willing to delegate this task, he can eliminate much discontent over schedules and work hours.¹⁸ I can confirm this condition with my own experience on both sides of the issue.

Communications, delegation, recognition, leadership styles, and work hours/schedules are only a few areas that provide opportunities for effective followers. If followers can remember nothing more than the importance and necessity of good communication and do their part in improving this area of responsibility, they can be certain of positive results.

Follower-Leader Link

At the beginning of this discussion, I defined a follower as anyone supervised by, or responsible to,

someone at a higher level. Since this definition includes all Air Force personnel, I believe that the service can benefit as individuals become better followers. By viewing problems from the follower's perspective, individuals can play major roles in improving their organizations. First, by practicing followership skills, they can become more sensitive to the needs of their organization through enhanced communication and acceptance of broader responsibilities. But the greatest benefit will be the improved organizational climate and more productive relationships between followers and their leaders. Obviously, many followers hold positions of leadership. Thus, by understanding and practicing the skills of followership, they can enhance their relationships with both their supervisors and their subordinates.

This relationship applies the "linking pin" concept described by Rensis Likert in these terms: "Subordinates expect their supervisors to be able to exercise an influence upward in dealing with problems on the job and in handling problems which affect them and their well-being."¹⁹ In other words, many followers function as "links" between followers above and below them. These so-called "links" are vital contact points in the chain

of communication, but many supervisors fail to recognize the importance of their followership roles. That is, they tend to forget that their examples as followers have as much impact on their subordinates as their examples as leaders.

Superiors seriously underestimate the extent to which their subordinates feel that their boss understands their problems. It is striking that foreman and general foreman feel that they understand the problems of their subordinates well, but each level feels that its boss does not understand the problems of his subordinates.²⁰

I strongly believe that, if a supervisor is fully aware of his role as a follower, his subordinates can perform more effectively and he can provide more efficient support for his boss.

Earlier in my discussion, I suggested that less effective leadership may result from poor followership. Although I cannot definitely state that poor followership will result in poor leadership, I do conclude that the knowledge and practice of followership skills will enhance a leader's ability and that he can be more acutely aware of both perspectives in his dealings with people. An officer or NCO should not wait until he attains the rank of colonel or chief master sergeant to become a leader. He must develop his followership skills early in his career. I believe that one who does

not practice these skills may attain high rank, but he will probably not be an effective leader. Whether we admit it or not, effective leadership depends on good followership; and good followership requires a conscientious effort.

We usually know the right way to approach a task, but frequently we behave otherwise because we are so preoccupied with performing the task that we ignore personal relationships. As we become more aware of both the task and our relationships, we should conscientiously apply our skills of followership in the total work environment. In this manner, application of followership skills can affect our leadership ability. As we progress through the ranks, we can multiply our followership skills through our contacts with other leaders and followers. Thus, our role as effective followers today will ultimately influence the quality of our leadership in the future.

FOOTNOTES

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6. Air Force Management Improvement Group, "Quality of Life in the US Air Force," Quality of Air Force Life Survey (Washington: Department of the Air Force, 1975), p. 1.
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13. Report NR 1, p. 7.
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16. Paul Hersey; et al, Contracting for Leadership Style (La Jolla, California: Learning Resources Corporation, 1977), pp. 5-12.
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19. Rensis Likert, New Patterns of Management (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1961), p. 113.
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